

The World of Foreign Books

JUGO-SLAV LITERATURE Surveyed by I. M. PETROVITCH.

OUT of the overturn brought about by the world war the Jugo-Slavs finally emerge and for the first time in history, as a united nation. Old historic errors, dead traditions, false ideals, have gone to the museums or scrap heap—the proper place for them. In literature new authors have appeared with much broader and more human sentiments and understanding and belonging not to some special province but to the whole nation. Such as they are, our new men are raising Jugo-Slav literature to a much higher level—to the level, indeed, of other great national literatures.

The world war closed whole periods in the arts of many great nations. It ended or brought to a minimum the creative work of many well known writers, such, for example, as Kipling, Hauptmann, Maxim Gorky, Merezhkovsky, D'Annunzio, Maeterlinck. Our former literary giants are nowadays most often writing memoirs or political pamphlets, brooding over the heaps of their broken ideals and destroyed illusions. It seems as if they were feeling the necessity for an apology to humanity.

The same thing has happened also with most of the Jugo-Slav writers, formerly prominent.

II.

To-day one rarely meets in the pages of current Serbian magazines the names of those who dominated literary taste before 1914. One gets the impression that we are removed from that fatal date by a whole century, not by just a few short years. And they were not old men, those who were writing in 1912, 1913 and 1914! Many of them, even, were in the prime of their youth. But half of them, and perhaps more, were devoured by the war; and the others have mostly ceased to write. So Milutin Uskokovitch, author of psychological and sociological novels and short stories (a pupil of the French school), in sorrow over the defeat of the Serbian army, committed suicide in 1915. V. Petkovitch-Diss, one of the best poets of the group of Belgrade decadents, was a victim of submarine warfare. Milutin Boytch, a young student, and a writer of passionate Sapphic sonnets, died in a gray and prosaic hospital for refugees in Saloniki.

As for those who are still alive, Borisav Stankovitch, a novelist of very vigorous and original talent, with an Oriental temperament and a southern *joie de vivre* mixed with deep yearnings of youth, to-day is no longer writing. Duchitch and Rakitch, two of our best Parnassians, whose literary dogmas were long the unwritten law of Serbian poetry, are now meandering about the world as members of the Jugo-Slav diplomatic corps. The diplomatic service in Jugo-Slavia sometimes offers sinecures for writers who have already won a certain literary reputation, and at the same time are in favor with the governing powers. Besides Duchitch and Rakitch, we may here mention Tresitch-Pavichitch (now head of the Jugo-Slav Legation in Washington), Branko Lazarevitch in Jugo-Slavia sometimes of- and Bozider Puritch, his successor in the same office. Who can tell whether one cause of the many recent failures of Jugo-Slav diplomacy may not be the affectation it has for such a brilliant staff of literary geniuses!

Sima Pandurovitch, the leader of the group of the decadents and modernists, is writing only political articles nowadays. Dr. Milan Churchin, the pioneer of free verse and of revolutionary modes in contemporary poetry, is at present editor of *New Europe*. Another, Mitrinovich, who created so great a sensation some years ago with his unusual style, disappeared from view during the war somewhere in London, and has never since returned. Mitrinovich is the Dorothy Arnold of Serbian letters. Various theories have been put forward to account for this mysterious disappearance. The best authenticated one mentions a certain Indian rajah who is said to be paying the bills while Mitrinovich studies Buddhism and Sanskrit.

Jovan Skerlitch, the great intellectual leader, our literary dictator for some ten years previous to the war (he was head of the department of Serbian literature in Belgrade University), died quite

suddenly in the spring of 1914. We are tempted to believe that he died at the right moment, because the war and its results would have brought him a great disappointment in the destruction of all his ideals. It is interesting to contemplate now the enormous influence of this man upon the younger generation of Jugo-Slavs. His taste (which favored a strictly nationalistic literature—literature "with a purpose," as opposed to all kinds of artism, symbolism, decadentism) and his ideals in politics (because he was at the same time also a member of Parliament)—were sacred law both for his students and for a great majority of other young people all over the present Jugo-Slavia.

III.

Of that whole pre-war group of writers who had literary value, only Branko Lazarevitch and Madame Isidora Sekulitch are still writing steadily to-day. Madame Sekulitch is especially active. She is the type of the crystallized intellectual, stressing thought more than feeling. A lover of refined paradox and euphonious phrasing, she writes essays that always attract intense interest. If we should attempt to find her mate in American literature, we could liken her to Amy Lowell—a literary figure quite similar to that of Madame Sekulitch.

From the Croatian writers of the same period, Prince Ivo Vojnovitch, the writer of some pompous odes, cosmopolitan dramas (such as "Madame With The Sunflower"), and a beautiful, tender historic trilogy about the Republic of Dubrovnik, has also ceased to create. Vladimir Nazor, a poet of intensive Dalmatian motifs full of sunshine, is still writing, but not so often and not so well. Mirko Korolya, the official Bacchus from the Dalmatian coast, is still prolific with his rhythmic and correctly measured expressions of passion. Dinko Shimunovitch, writer of stories and novels about the monotonous, quiet, uneventful life of the country, is mostly interesting for his very beautiful and artistic literary landscapes. His style has always much of color and of freshness. Ivo Chipiko, also a writer from Dalmatia, whose short stories have some touches of D'Annunzio's early work, has spoken, it seems, his last words.

From the group of typical Bosnian and Herzegovinian writers, only Shantitch still writes more or less credible things. Shantitch is especially famous as the writer of a poetic one act play "In the Mist," which was directed against the emigration to America of Jugo-Slav peasants, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Especially popular were the verses beginning:

"Remain here! The sun of alien skies
Will not shine as this sun shines here.
Bitter are the crumbs of bread
There where your own is not,
There where no brother is."

Another writer from the same group, Petar Kochitch, a writer of political satires on the Austro-Hungarian regime in Bosnia, met a tragic death at the end of the war in a sanitarium for the insane in Belgrade. His best known work was a play "The Badger before the Judge."

IV.

In view of all this it becomes clear that the "young men" of Jugo-Slavia found a clear field before them for innovations and renovation—tendencies moreover that were not slow in manifesting themselves once the turmoil of war was over. What an abyss between our prewar mental state and that of Myroslav Krljeza, for instance! Kreeza, a Jugo-Slav from Croatia, does not write for one nation and in the name of one nation. He is much broader and more cosmopolitan than that, with sentiments too deep and too refined for imprisonment within any one province or parish. All his work comes from him spontaneously, sincerely, not with the premeditation of a program but with the force of fresh inspiration. His "Croatian Rhapsody," which I hope soon to see translated into English, gives, through pictures of purely Croatian setting, glimpses into the whole world and the present conflict of ideas which has thrown our world into a mad whirl. Krljeza's style is explosive and as dazzling as a flashlight. His literary credo is, if we may use such a paradox, doubt in that New Man, who is to come

and save the world from economic misery, from falsehood and hypocrisy—that New Man who has been so frequently evoked by former revolutionary writers. He denies more than he affirms. Thought wholly, mercilessly negative, his negativism is strong, convincing and overpowering. It is not mere cynicism, as in the case of another contemporary Jugo-Slav writer, Milosh Crnjansky; but a higher and more human pessimism which does not deny the possible existence of certain ideals, but regrets rather their weakness, their falsity and deceptiveness.

V.

Just before the end of the world war there was published, this time, too, among the Croats, a book by Ivo Andrich under the title "Ex-Ponto." The book attracted much comment and sympathy, and in a short time ran through several editions. Though written during the war, and indirectly caused by the war (it was motivated by the imprisonment of its writer for his political ideas, in Austro-Hungarian prisons) the whole book makes the impression of something deeply personal, something isolated from all the world. These are very tender and extremely intimate confessions of soul hurt by base and mean surroundings, and voicing disillusionment, disappointment. It is a great monologue, a collection of momentary reflections and analyses, fine "vibrations of the soul"—nothing more. There is no mention of all that was going on at that moment everywhere in the world. It is as if the author had cut himself off from all worldly things, enclosing himself in a few of his blue and tranquil perspectives, full of longing and expectation, not willing to see anything further, eager not to know anything more. The other things of Andrich, such as "The Way of Alya Djerdjelez," are in a quite different style—reversions, as it were, to the social and psychological novel.

Milosh Crnjansky, a Jugo-Slav of Serbian origin, born of an old bureaucratic family, somewhere in The Banat, exemplifies in himself and in his works the degeneration of a particular Jugo-Slav type belonging to a special province. His lyric is pale, morbid, morose, and prefers momentary ecstasy to deep love and higher understanding. Former socialist, former nationalist, former "man of the people" (at least by party affiliation), and former aristocrat—meeting in his youth disappointments which he had neither sufficient power nor the necessary heroism to overcome—he is now, especially in his prose, a steady negation of everything, full of sarcasm and cynicism, with feebly accented expectations of something new and better. This "new and better" of his is without any precise definition. It may actually be nothing at all beyond a phrase. In general Crnjansky is one of those writers who are giving more attention to style than to content.

Rastko Petrovitch, pseudo-modernist, energetically unites in some fifty lines of a poem, "Perun," the whole heavy artillery of old Slavonic pagan gods with airplanes, policemen, benzol and healthy red cheeked peasant girls. He and "his gang" call this "new revolutionism" or "dynamism" in poetry. Gustav Krjoc is a poet very much under the influence of contemporary German lyricists, above all of R. M. Rilke. He is a poet with a certain distinct and well formed style, but without great pretensions or sweeping gesture. His attempt to write for the theater was not successful. Stanislav Vinaver is a great jester. He does not mean seriously all that he says. It is charged that he is too thirsty for international reputation. I

hope that this time his dear wish is somewhat satisfied.

It was quite natural that the older and more conservative writers should, at the first appearance of these tendencies, begin a ferocious campaign against the new ideas.



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